

# Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2002

Ruben N. Lubowski, Marlow Vesterby,  
Shawn Bucholtz, Alba Baez, and  
Michael J. Roberts

## How the Land Is Used

The United States has a land area of about 2.3 billion acres, which is allocated among a variety of uses (fig. 1). The largest shares of the Nation's land were allocated to **forest use**, **grassland pasture and range**, and **cropland**. (See Appendix for detailed descriptions of terms in **bold**). About 20 percent of the land area was cropland in 2002, 26 percent was permanent grassland pasture and range, and 29 percent was forest-use land.<sup>1</sup> **Urban areas** constituted just 3 percent of U.S. land, while a variety of **special uses** accounted for 13 percent of the land base and **miscellaneous other** uses comprised the remaining 10 percent. These proportions are significantly affected by the land area of Alaska, which, relative to the contiguous 48 States, has small amounts of cropland and pasture but large areas of forest-use, special-use, and miscellaneous other land. The full set of historical estimates, by region and State, are available online as an ERS data series, Major Land Uses.<sup>2</sup>

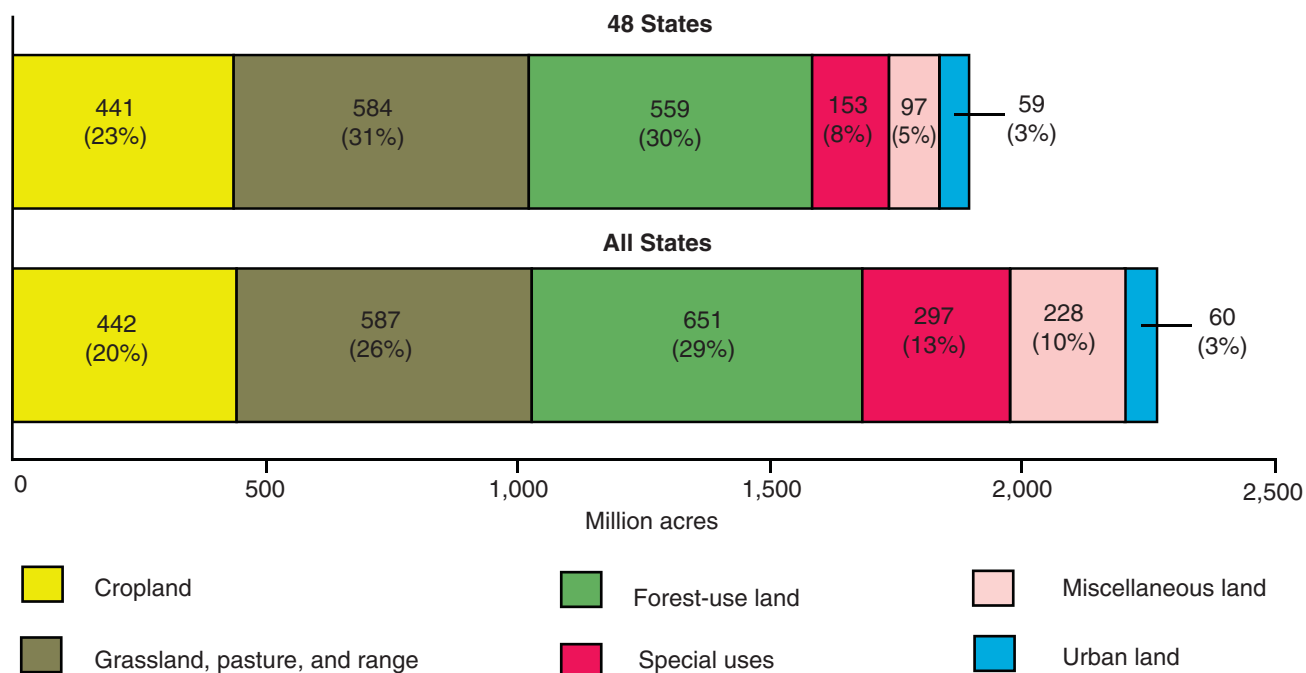
Land classified as cropland totaled about 442 million acres in 2002 (fig. 1). This total represents all land in crop rotation, including **cropland pasture** (fig. 2). **Cropland used for crops—cropland harvested, cropland failure, and cultivated summer fallow**—totaled 340 million acres, or 77 percent of total cropland acreage (table 1). Fourteen percent of total cropland was cropland used only for pasture, while 9 percent of total cropland was classified as **idle cropland**. Acreage enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is included in this component. The CRP, established by the Food Security Act of 1985, is the largest Federal program idling cropland, offering annual rental payments to farm owners and operators who voluntarily retire environmentally sensitive cropland under 10- to 15-year contracts. In 2002, the CRP paid about \$1.6 billion to retire about 34 million cropland acres (an area almost the size of Iowa).

In 2002, land used for agricultural purposes—cropland; grassland pasture and range; **forest land grazed**; and land in farmsteads, farm roads, and lanes—totaled nearly 1.2 billion acres, just under 52 percent of total U.S. land area (table 1). By comparison, the Census Bureau estimated 938 million acres of "land in farms" in 2002 (USDA/NASS, 2004a). The difference is mostly accounted for by grazing lands (both forested and nonforested) not defined by Census as being in farms, and cropland under-

<sup>1</sup> The forest-use designation excludes about 98 million acres of **forest land in special uses**, such as parks and wildlife areas. **Forest land** used for all purposes in 2002 totaled 749 million acres, nearly a third of the land area of the United States.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/majorlanduses/>. Additional summary tables for 2002 are available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/majorlanduses/>.

Figure 1

**Major uses of land, 2002**

Notes: The area of each major land use is listed in millions of acres with the corresponding share of the total land base in parentheses. Urban uses are listed as a separate category and are not included under the special uses category as was done in previous *Major Land Uses* reports. The land base includes streams and canals less than one-eighth mile wide, and ponds, lakes, and reservoirs covering less than 40 acres. Distributions by major use may not add to totals due to rounding. See Appendix for more complete descriptions of the different land-use categories.

Sources: Estimates are based on reports and records of the Bureau of the Census (HUD/BOC, 1992, 2002, 2003) and Federal, State, and local land management and conservation agencies including DOI/BLM, 2003; DOT/BTS, 2004; DOT/FAA, 2002; DOT/FHWA, 2002; DOT/FRA, 2004; USDA/FS 1989, 1998; DOI/FWS, 2001; GSA, 2001; GDT, 2000; USDA/NASS, 2004a, 2005; DOI/NPS, 2002; USDA/NRCS, 2000, 2004a; and WI, 2002.

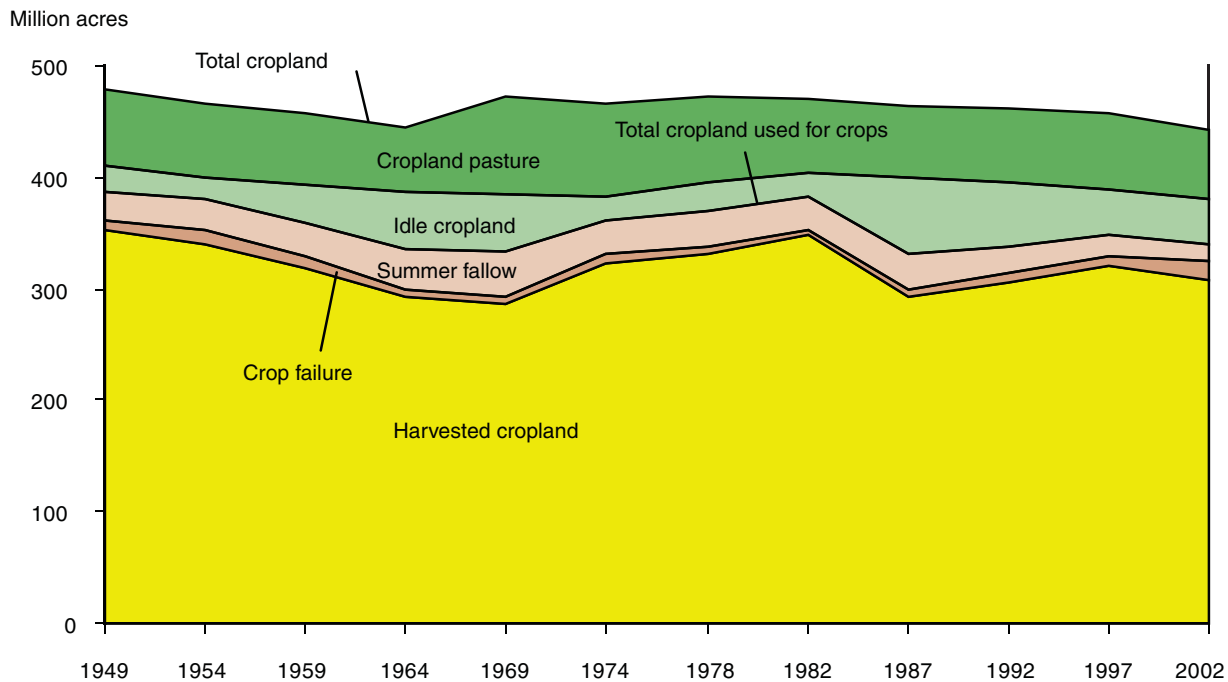
enumerated by the Census of Agriculture (Barnard and Hexem, 1988). In 2002, the Census estimate of total principal crops harvested was about 98 percent of the estimate for the same crops from the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). The Major Land Uses cropland estimate is based on Census data, with an adjustment to reconcile the estimates with the NASS data in each State.

Livestock grazing was the primary use of an estimated 587 million acres of permanent grassland pasture and range, accounting for 26 percent of all U.S. land and half of all agricultural land. When cropland pasture (62 million acres) and forested grazing land (134 million acres) are added to the permanent grassland acreage, total grazing land comprised about 783 million acres, or 35 percent of the total U.S. land area and two-thirds of all agricultural land.

**Forest-use land not grazed** (total forest land minus land grazed and in special uses, such as national and State parks) amounted to 517 million acres and the largest share of nonagricultural land (table 1). Nonagricultural special-use areas (excluding almost 11 million acres of special-use land in farmsteads and farm roads) were estimated to account for more than 286

Figure 2

## Major uses of U.S. cropland



Note: See Appendix for descriptions of the different cropland categories.

Sources: Estimates prior to 2002 are from Daugherty, 1991, 1995; Frey, 1973, 1979, 1982; Frey and Hexem; Frey et al., 1968; Wooten et al., 1962; Vesterby and Krupa; Wooten and Anderson, 1957; and Wooten, 1953a.

million acres, almost 13 percent of the Nation's land area. Federal and State parks, wildlife refuges, and related acres occupied 242 million acres, almost 11 percent of the total land base. **Rural transportation land** accounted for 27 million acres, and defense and other public installations/facilities totaled about 17 million acres.

Sixty million acres were classified as urban areas; all but 400,000 acres were in the contiguous 48 States. Urban acreage accounted for less than 3 percent of the Nation's overall land area, and just over 3 percent of the land area of the contiguous 48 States.<sup>3</sup> The remaining 228 million acres (10 percent) of the U.S. land area included various miscellaneous uses not inventoried, including tundra, deserts, bare rock areas, snow and ice fields, swamps, marshes, and other unclassified areas generally of low agricultural value. The land classed under other miscellaneous uses may also include much of the estimated 94 million acres of land used for rural housing lots in 2002. Given the data used to define **rural residential area**, it is not possible to distinguish rural housing lots from land classed under nonurban other uses, such as forests or grassland pasture and range.

<sup>3</sup> In previous *Major Land Uses* reports, urban areas were classified as part of special-use areas. Given the growing interest in urban land-use trends, urban areas are treated as a distinct use in this report. For reporting consistency, urban areas are listed separately as well as under special uses in the ERS Major Land Uses data product.

Table 1

**Agricultural and nonagricultural uses of land, United States, 2002**

	Acreage		Proportion of total	
Land use	48 States	U.S.	48 States	U.S.
	-----Million acres-----		-----Percent-----	
<b>Agricultural</b>				
Cropland:				
Cropland used for crops <sup>1</sup>	340	340	18.0	15.0
Idle cropland	40	40	2.1	1.8
Cropland used only for pasture	62	62	3.3	2.7
Grassland pasture and range	584	587	30.8	25.9
Forest-use land:				
Forest land grazed	134	134	7.1	5.9
Special uses:				
Farmsteads, farm roads	11	11	0.6	0.5
Total agricultural land <sup>2</sup>	1,171	1,174	61.8	51.8
<b>Nonagricultural</b>				
Forest-use land:				
Forest-use land not grazed <sup>3</sup>	425	517	22.4	22.8
Special uses:				
Transportation uses <sup>4</sup>	27	27	1.4	1.2
Recreation and wildlife areas <sup>5</sup>	100	242	5.3	10.7
National defense areas <sup>6</sup>	15	17	0.8	0.8
Urban land	59	60	3.1	2.6
Miscellaneous other land <sup>7</sup>	97	228	5.1	10.1
Total nonagricultural land <sup>2</sup>	723	1,091	38.2	48.2
<b>Total land area <sup>2</sup></b>	<b>1,894</b>	<b>2,264</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<sup>1</sup> Cropland harvested, crop failure, and cultivated summer fallow.<sup>2</sup> Breakdown of land uses may not add to totals due to rounding.<sup>3</sup> Excludes 98 million acres of forest land in parks and other special uses.<sup>4</sup> Rural highways, roads and railroad rights-of-way, and rural airports.<sup>5</sup> National and State parks and related recreational areas, national and State wildlife refuges, and national wilderness and primitive areas.<sup>6</sup> Federal land administered by the Department of Defense for military purposes and land administered by the Department of Energy.<sup>7</sup> Includes miscellaneous uses not inventoried, and areas of little surface use such as marshes, open swamps, bare rock areas, desert, and tundra.

Sources: Estimates are based on reports and records of the Bureau of the Census (HUD/BOC, 1992, 2002, 2003) and Federal, State, and local land management and conservation agencies, including DOI/BLM, 2003; DOT/BTS, 2004; DOT/FAA, 2002; DOT/FHWA, 2002; DOT/FRA, 2004; USDA/FS 1989, 1998; DOI/FWS, 2001; GSA, 2001; GDT, 2000; USDA/NASS, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; DOI/NPS, 2002; USDA/NRCS, 2000, 2004a; and WI, 2002.